

Dear Congregants and Friends ~

With all of the challenges to organized religion in our contemporary society, our synagogue, like so many other Jewish institutions, is currently undergoing an envisioning and strategic planning process in an effort to most effectively address and respond to these challenges.

“What we, as a synagogue community, want our priorities to be for the coming year(s)” is a question of critical importance. Fortunately, we are guided in answering this question by our own rich and venerable Tradition. The rabbis teach, for example, in *Pirkei Avot*, “The teachings of our ancestors”, that the viability of the Jewish Tradition (and I would add “of the synagogue”) is grounded on 3 separate but related principles: (1) Torah study, that is, our becoming knowledgeable Jews, so that we can better appreciate the richness and complexity of our Tradition; (2) *Avodah*, or “service” to God and community, which includes participating in joyful and meaningful prayer services (like our *Shabbat Chai* with our own *Bashert*), in the governance of the synagogue, in social and other types of synagogue programming, etc., and (3) “*gemillut hasadim*, “doing acts of lovingkindness”, which today would also include “*tikkun olam*, “helping to repair the world through social justice”.

Studies show that the most dynamic and viable synagogue communities are those which focus on and emphasize these 3 areas.

Because developing a community of knowledgeable Jews is so important for C.B.I.’s well-being, I have been asked to teach, on a monthly basis, a Sunday morning class on an area of interest from our Tradition. I welcome any recommendations that you may have for potential subjects for these teachings.

The first such teaching was held this past week and asked the following question: “With each of us having only so much free time in our busy, 21st Century lives, and with there being a goodly number of both ritual and ethical *mitzvot*, or “commandments” to be fulfilled, does the Jewish Tradition give us any guidance as to which of these commandments, all of which are important, may be the most important? Fortunately, the rabbis and sages of old, who also had full time jobs, families, and personal lives to attend to, helped answer this important question for us.

While we looked at a number of teachings from the Jewish sacred texts in the class, I am going to discuss just 2 of them in this article. The first, from the Talmud, involves a discussion among the rabbis as to which of the 3 foundational principles identified above may be the most important? While there is, initially, a difference of opinion among the rabbis, a majority of them eventually concluded that Torah study is the most important. Why? Because the rabbis felt that, if one comes to understand and appreciate the beauty and richness of our Tradition, this will likely lead to personal transformation, causing the person to serve God, the synagogue community, and others, through their deeds and words, in a more loving, kinder, and caring way.

This led the rabbis to ask, however, “what if a person studies Torah and becomes a knowledgeable Jew, however, but is not transformed?” Their answer is clearly reflected in another teaching from the Talmud:

“One who learns *Torah*, studies *Mishnah*, and serves Torah scholars, but his business dealings are not conducted honestly, and whose manner in speaking to people is not pleasant,

woe unto him and to his teacher.”

This teaching makes clear that one studies *Torah*, not primarily to satisfy one’s intellectual or ego needs, but to transform the person in her/his relationships with God and with others.

That the essence of our Tradition and the primary purpose for becoming a knowledgeable Jew is to refine and transform ourselves as human beings is also poignantly illustrated in this famous teaching from perhaps the greatest of the 1st century rabbis, Hillel:

“A certain non-Jew (polytheist) first came before Shammai (another great 1st century Rabbi) and said to him: ‘I will convert to Judaism on condition that you can teach me the entire *Torah*, while I am standing on one foot.’ Shammai (feeling that the man was making a mockery of him and of Judaism) chased the person away with a stick that he had in his hand. The same man then approached Hillel and made the same request of him. Hillel, unlike Shammai, agreed to convert him on the spot, saying to him, ‘that which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. Everything else in the Torah follows from this ethical principle. Now go do it.’”

This teaching by Hillel reinforces for us that the primary function and goal of Torah study is to lead us to being kinder and more loving and caring in our relationships with God and with others.

I would like to close my column this month with a teaching by one of this country’s greatest 20th century rabbis, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a professor at my seminary, a great scholar, and a committed human rights activist, “To be a Jew is to be in relationship with God, while at the same time, to feel and to see the presence of God in our relationships with and in the eyes of others. Doing acts of social justice and performing acts of lovingkindness are acts of worship and ways of being in relationship with the Almighty.”

As Jews, our Tradition thus teaches that, while it is important that we try to find the time to learn as much as we can about our Tradition and to fulfill as many of the *mitzvot* as possible, it is equally, if not more, important that we always be aware that the *ikar*, the “essence”, of Judaism is the personal transformation that takes place, leading us to speak and act differently in our relationships with God, with our fellow humans, and with God’s other creatures and creations.

B’Shalom! In Peace! Rabbi Howard Mandell